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Giving Voice to Silent Destruction

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Giving Voice to Silent Destruction

Introduction

While answering a question about translation at a reading of *Austerlitz*¹ held by the Jewish organization 92Y, German author W. G. Sebald (1944-2001) said, “In the case of this particular book [*Austerlitz*] there is a passage of some ten pages, which is a pastiche of the language of administration, which uh, my compatriots developed in the nineteen-thirties, more or less unwittingly to describe their own activities.”² Here, Sebald has referred to the Nazis as compatriots, a trend that held true for him whenever he talked about them. However, far from sharing any Nazi views on racial supremacy, Sebald was awarded the Jewish Quarterly-Wingate Prize for Fiction for both *The Emigrants*³ in 1997 and *Austerlitz* in 2002, which both centered on characters who had suffered from Nazi persecution. The use of the word compatriot instead recognizes Sebald’s fundamental belief that only by recognizing connections with the past rather than alienating them could humanity truly progress. When Sebald used the word compatriots, he was recognizing that he was German like the Nazis and that the Third Reich and all it entailed is a part of his country’s past and his identity.

Sebald studied how historical methodology contributed to this alienation of various groups, particularly World War II Germans, and the consequences of that alienation so that he could develop and use historical countermeasures in his own writing. Sebald’s unique approach

¹ W. G. Sebald, *Austerlitz*, translated by Anthea Bell (New York: Modern Library, 2001).

² 92nd Street Y, “W. G. Sebald | 92Y Readings,” Filmed [15 October 2001], YouTube video, 49:22, posted [18 July 2013], <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ccMCGjWLhY>.

³ W. G. Sebald, *The Emigrants*, translated by Michael Hulse (New York: New Directions, 1996).

advocated for a genre of history that moved beyond narratives of nations, eras, victims, and perpetrators to promote constructive discussions with an awareness of their relevance to the present.

Sebald's refusal to ignore any part of the past resulted in his life-long study of what he called a conspiracy of silence in Germany, regarding the destruction of World War II and the Holocaust, a concept that reached the international multi-century scale in his popular and scholarly works.⁴ Sebald was born in the last year of World War II and grew up in the town of Wertach, Germany⁵ for the first eight years of his life. Wertach is located in the Alps and has a population that now reaches approximately 2,000 people. It was untouched by the war as well as modernity of any kind with machines being introduced in the 1950s.⁶ Sebald recalls that the Holocaust was addressed only in school by way of, "documentary films which were shown to us without comment. So, you know, it was a sunny June afternoon, and you would see one of those liberation of Dachau or Belsen films, and then you would go and play football because you did not really know what you should do with it."⁷ These isolated incidents when the Holocaust was brought up and the lack of constructive presentation during those incidents became Sebald's first recognition of a conspiracy of silence. The silence occurred when the Holocaust and the larger scope of the destruction of World War II were never discussed except in brief spurts in school without any true attempt at fostering understanding.

⁴ Charles Simic, "Conspiracy of Silence," in *The Emergence of Memory: Conversations with W. G. Sebald*, edited by Lynne Sharon Schwartz (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2007), 145-158.

⁵ Wertach is located in the German Alps and would have been considered part of West Germany until German reunification in 1990.

⁶ Mark M. Anderson, "A Childhood in Algäu," in *Saturn's Moons: W. G. Sebald – A Handbook*, edited by Jo Catling and Richard Hibbitt (London: Modern Humanities Research Association and Maney Publishing, 2011), 25.

⁷ Joseph Cuomo, "A Conversation with W. G. Sebald," in *The Emergence of Memory: Conversations with W. G. Sebald*, edited by Lynne Sharon Schwartz (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2007), 105.

The lack of constructive discussion created a split in German identity for Sebald and other members of the first Post-War generation who could not connect the horror of the Holocaust with the adult figures in their lives. The separation of the German which committed all the atrocities of thirties and forties also separated Germans who suffered from the bombing during the war and the massive destruction wrought by the Soviet Red Army as it swept through East Germany in 1945. Not only had this silence prevented constructive discussion, it also destroyed a sense of personal connection to the destruction that could have made it comprehensible for this first generation and prevented them from mourning the extreme cultural and historical losses caused by the bombings. As a result, the sense and value of history became marred by the silence.

For Sebald, finding the silenced episodes of destruction that tainted history and bringing them to the attention of the reader represented the highest calling of both history and literature because only in the combination of the two could, “there be an attempt at restitution over and above the mere recital of facts, and over and above scholarship.”⁸ Sebald was motivated to provide restitution for those who suffered destruction but also to create a less abstract understanding of destruction by humanizing both victims and perpetrators. This humanization served not to excuse the destruction but to emphasize the human capacity for it and act as a warning to readers lest they fall into the same trap and commit similar acts.

Sebald felt that the existence of structure and convention in scholarly writing did not allow for constructive approaches to the large-scale destruction. Sebald was interviewed frequently about his methodology and once said that he always preferred to research, “in the same way in which, say, a dog runs through a field. If you look at a dog following the advice of

⁸ W. G. Sebald, “An Attempt at Restitution,” in *Camp Santo*, translated by Anthea Bell (New York: The Modern Library, 2006), 205.

his nose, he traverses a patch of land in a completely unplotable manner. And he invariably finds what he's looking for."⁹ Sebald preferred to explore connections as they occurred, building a collection of seemingly random materials until some kind of broader connection occurred and then writing the piece.¹⁰ Sebald's popular works reflect this even more in that they are structured to resemble his research method, jumping from topic to topic as connections occur no matter how seemingly random or tangential until the end of the work ties it all together. In both his scholarly and popular works, Sebald worked hard to include a sense of the present in his histories by showing how the perception of the past shaped by history affected the present even as he wrote his own interpretation of the histories, creating a deeper sense of the relevance of history while also showing the actual events in a new light.

According to Harvard University's Writing Center, Sebald's methodology and writing style violates many of the precepts of historical writing convention, including its claim that, "the guiding principle behind all historical writing must be *selection* and *interpretation*: the thoughtful selection of topics and questions that seem most interesting, and the responsible interpretation of sources in order to construct meaningful arguments."¹¹ Sebald did not put a lot of thought into a topic selection in the conventional sense. Admittedly, his works center around themes of destruction and silenced histories, but only because those were the things that caught his eye during his whimsical research process rather than any kind of thoughtful selection process. Sebald's scholarly works have a tendency to be light on interpretation. He focused on presenting the reader with things that he found interesting and explaining why they sparked his

⁹ Cuomo, "A Conversation with W. G. Sebald," 94.

¹⁰ Ibid., 94-95.

¹¹ Dan Wewers, *Writing Center Brief Guide Series: A Brief Guide to Writing the History Paper*, PDF, Harvard: Harvard University Writing Center, 2007, accessed 28 May 2016, http://writingproject.fas.harvard.edu/files/hwp/files/bg_writing_history.pdf, 1.

interest with the endnotes being the only indication that the work was scholarly rather than popular. At the end of a piece, Sebald would come up with his conclusions through interpretation, but his pointed presence in the entire process and willingness to share more research than was necessary for the thesis also leaves the reader with room to form their own interpretations of the research with relative confidence.

Harvard's writing center also has a list of nine conventions for historical writing.¹² Sebald violates three of the conventions as a standard part of his style and while the letter of four of the remaining conventions can be applied to his writing, Sebald certainly did not respect their spirit. The first convention states that histories must be written in the past tense.¹³ Sebald obeyed the convention of using past tense when talking about past events in his works quite stringently because he felt it was important to distinguish between the actual events of history and their effects on modernity. However, Sebald strongly objected to the historical method of reducing a mass of research down into a thesis with supporting evidence, which he felt created oversimplified perceptions of the past. Because of that danger in traditional history, Sebald also adhered very closely to the convention of avoiding vague generalizations.

However, the use of past tense and avoidance of generalization are the only points of commonality between Sebald's writings and a traditional history. Sebald blatantly disobeys the conventions stating that historians should avoid presentism or anachronisms, use consistent citation, and write in a formal academic voice.¹⁴ Sebald always left the academic voice behind at some point in each publication in favor of including his personal experiences and thoughts with the use of the informal "I". He also shied away from citation in his scholarly works. Throughout

¹² Ibid., 4.

¹³ Ibid., 4.

¹⁴ Ibid., 4.

the eighties, Sebald managed to sprinkle in footnotes and references in his works, but by the nineties (the same time period in which his novels appear) even his scholarly publications simply referenced the author and titles of texts in the body of the work without any kind of formal citation.¹⁵ Ironically, Sebald was interviewed dozens of times in the nineties and his lack of citation was never brought up, so there will never be a truly definitive answer for the why of this. Since Sebald began writing his novels in the nineties as a rebellion against traditional scholarship and its systematic methodology,¹⁶ the best conclusion is an inductive one: Sebald quit formally citing information because he was fed up with convention and had decided to abandon it altogether.

On the convention of avoiding presentism¹⁷ or anachronisms,¹⁸ the Harvard Writing Center recommends resisting, “the temptation to relate all historical arguments or concerns back to the present. Rather, investigate the past on its own terms. Take care not to jumble the chronological order of events.”¹⁹ Sebald’s scholarly writings before the nineties do make some vague attempts at a historical timeline, but his interest in history came from the present perspective. Sebald was only interested in historical events as they affected the present and the discrepancies between present perceptions and past realities, so his work was presentist in the sense that he brought the present into the past and the past into the present constantly. His more popular works and the later parts of his scholarship also tossed out any adherence to a timeline

¹⁵ Sven Meyer, “Editorial Note,” Editorial Note to *Campo Santo*, by W. G. Sebald, translated by Anthea Bell, vii-ix, New York: Modern Library, 2005, ix.

¹⁶ Cuomo, “A Conversation with Sebald,” 94.

¹⁷ Presentism is defined as: an attitude toward the past dominated by present-day attitudes and experiences. (“Presentism,” Merriam-Webster.com, accessed May 28, 2016, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/presentism>.)

¹⁸ Anachronism is defined as: ¹something or someone that is not in its correct historical or chronological time, especially a thing or person that belongs to an earlier time; ²an error in chronology in which a person, object, event, etc., is assigned a date or period other than the correct one. anachronism. (“Anachronism,” Dictionary.com, accessed May 28, 2016, <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/anachronism>.)

¹⁹ Wewers, *A Brief Guide to Writing the History Paper*, 4.

jumping from the nineties to the Ice Age to the Taiping Rebellion without any concern for chronology. However, the biggest reason to avoid presentism and anachronism is the distortion of past events. Sebald avoided distorting past events by creating a comparison of the past within the context of the past and the past in the context of the present. In doing so, Sebald also breathed new relevance into history by giving it an active life in the present with real consequences that he took the time to highlight.

Sebald reinterpreted the conventions of proofreading, providing context, quotation use, and respect for the historical subject.²⁰ Sebald's works have been proofread and his grammatical choices were intentional but not necessarily for the purpose of readability. Sebald's sentences average between three and four lines in length and his paragraphs have been known to go on for pages in both his scholarly and popular works. His last novel, *Austerlitz*, did not even have chapter breaks. This is another point in Sebald's work that has not been closely examined, but the long sentences and paragraphs, while more difficult to read, do force a complexity of connection between clauses with the use of conjunctions as well as expressing that Sebald felt tight connections with the larger bodies of thoughts, ideas, and events expressed in each paragraph. So, while Sebald did proofread, he did not do so in the intended academic spirit.

As to the convention of context, this is defined as providing the reader with an interrogation of each source, interpreting the evidence, and reporting the findings of the interrogation and interpretation.²¹ Sebald did not generally interrogate sources or interpret them for his readers but rather presented them as he found them and gave the readers his experience in finding them with rare bursts of interpretation generally at the end of his research wanderings. So

²⁰ Ibid., 4.

²¹ Ibid., 4.

while Sebald provided the context of how he experienced the source and where he found it, he did not provide the exhaustive contextualization expected in historical scholarship.

Sebald's use of quotes does follow the traditional convention in that he did use quotes only when the source said it better than he could, but he did not use the traditional quote sandwich of introducing the source, quoting the source, summarizing the quote, and then integrating it into his larger work. Rather, he tended to simply drop the quote as he wrote about a source and move on without examining or integrating it. The last convention, respecting the historical subject, which the writing center defined as aspiring, "to understand, rather than judge, the past,"²² is probably the most complex within the context of Sebald's works. Sebald's works, both scholarly and popular, tend to the melancholic,²³ which makes them seem grave on the surface. However, Sebald had a fondness for irony, so any internal inconsistencies in his own life and perceptions, modernity's, or the past's are pointed out with subtle irony as well as gentle understanding, as has often been remarked on.²⁴ Sebald dedicated his writing career to the subject of history and its relevance in the present, so while he did respect it, he did not pay it the reverence of being above the judgement of criticism when appropriate, which he wielded with gentle irony.

Sebald viewed the relevance of history as being rooted in its effect on the present. In shifting history's center of gravity, he negated or revised many of the conventions of the discipline in his own writing. The end result is a product that is redolent with history even as it looks and feels like no history ever written. However, Sebald's writings do incorporate different

²² Ibid., 4.

²³ This is the most common adjective used to describe Sebald's writing and one he cultivated with references to Saturn, which was a symbol of melancholy in ancient times.

²⁴ "W. G. Sebald on Bookworm," interview by Michael Silverblatt, YouTube. April 5, 2012 [originally transmitted December 6, 2001], accessed May 28, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pSFcTWIg-Pg>.

historical philosophies, particularly Michel-Rolph Trouillot's theories of power and production in history, Carlo Ginzburg's concept of microhistory, Theodor Adorno's theories of natural history, and the philosophy of "Other" as put forward by multiple scholars. On a more concrete level, Sebald's work centers on the topics of genocide, war, and environmental history including but not exclusive to Post-World War II Germany. Sebald managed to utilize a complex interplay of historical philosophies and historical topics by moving beyond the borders of fiction, nonfiction, and academic writing into something Gonzo.

Sebald: A Gonzo Historian

Gonzo has no clear origin and is best understood, "to mean 'crazy, of the wall, out of control.'"²⁵ Within their fields, Hunter S. Thompson and W. G. Sebald both went a little crazy and created off the wall products. However, both authors utilized too much intent to be considered out of control as they created products that broke the mold of writers past and refused to be placed in a new mold. Thompson and Sebald do not appear to have much in common either professionally or personally at first glance. Thompson was born in Louisville, Kentucky and wrote journalistic pieces on topics filled with drugs, alcohol, and corruption in an irreverent and flamboyant style. Sebald was born in the tiny town called Wertach in the German Alps to a well to do family and wrote understated works with elegant prose that philosophically meandered through history. Yet both authors actively avoided being labeled in both style and genre while writing works that challenged accepted generalizations and demanded shifts in perceptions generated by those generalizations.

Thompson was the first identified writer to invent a Gonzo category within his discipline, that of journalism. There is no indication that Thomson influenced Sebald and in fact there is no

²⁵ Jason Mosser, "What's Gonzo about Gonzo Journalism?" *Literary Journalism Studies* 4, no. 1 (Spring 2012): 85-90, *Communications and Mass Media Complete*, EBSCOhost, accessed May 6, 2016, 85.

scholarship connecting the two to date. In June of 1970, *Scanlan's Monthly* published "The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved"²⁶ and changed sports journalism forever. Before 1970, a sports journalist wrote a blow-by-blow account of the sporting event and nothing else, but Thompson was not a sports journalist. He took *Scanlan's* editor Warren Hinkle at his word when he said, "go wild if you can, go as crazy as you want to."²⁷ Thompson, who had grown up poor in Louisville, the home of the Kentucky Derby, and had not been home in ten years, leapt at the chance to expose his home town.

He went into the assignment trying to find, "a symbol, in my own mind, of the whole doomed atavistic culture that makes the Kentucky Derby what it is."²⁸ He even went so far as to characterize the fans of the Kentucky Derby as the greatest irony because the horse owners so obsessively studied and controlled the breeding to bring out the best in the horses while doing their best to marry their children off to people in the same narrow community in a kind of cultural and racial inbreeding that brought out the worst traits in humanity.²⁹ Of the fifteen pages of the article, only seven lines even notice the race itself. The rest of the piece meanders through Thompson's experience, including a family dinner and the various tricks that Thompson used to get a hotel room in overbooked Louisville as well as better seating and a better story at the Derby. Thompson also included several stories about the last-minute, British illustrator Ralph Steadman, who kept offending people with his art. Thompson's copious drinking and overzealous use of mace weave throughout the piece, creating a deep sense of Thompson's loud, challenging, and unfiltered personality.

²⁶ Hunter S. Thompson, "The Kentucky Derby Is Decadent and Depraved," *Scanlan's Monthly* 1, no. 4 (June 1970), accessed May 7, 2016, <http://brianb.freeshell.org/a/kddd.pdf>.

²⁷ "Gonzo @ the Derby," in *30 for 30 Shorts*, directed by Micahel D. Ratner, aired May 3, 2016 (ESPN, 2016), TV.

²⁸ Thompson, "The Kentucky Derby Is Decadent and Depraved," 8.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 8.

“The Kentucky Derby Is Decadent and Depraved” was the first identified piece of Gonzo journalism, and journalists consider it to be *the* characteristic Thompson Gonzo journalism piece.³⁰ Thompson would go on to experiment with the style in works such as *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail in '72* and many others until his suicide in 2005. Most other attempts at Gonzo journalism fall into the general category of New Journalism developed from the late sixties and still very much present today where the reporter’s subjective experience becomes an important part of the story. While Gonzo journalism is a recognized genre, its stylistic definition has more accurately reflected Thompson’s personal writing voice than any genre characteristics even including his “agonized struggle to produce a finished article by the deadline”³¹ as a key Gonzo characteristic. However, adding Sebald to the conversation as a Gonzo author and reevaluating the genre standards produces a more accurate and applicable genre for the purposes of this discussion.

The first and most important identifying characteristic, which scholars have hit on, is that the style must subjectively reflect the author’s worldview and personality. Thompson drank heavily, was comfortable with drug use, and a proponent of the anti-authoritarian mentality that cynically questioned everything. Every page of the Kentucky Derby piece references drinking or being hungover while criticizing the political nature of even something as simple as the level and availability of press access in conversational language that tends towards the crude. The occasional reflective paragraph highlights Thompson’s capacity for intellectualism with words like atavistic even as he pointedly rejects it in the rest of the piece.

Similarly, Sebald’s style reflects his personality quite clearly. Sebald did many talks and interviews, particularly in the last ten years of his life. In each, his intellectual nature shined

³⁰ Jason Mosser, “What’s Gonzo about Gonzo Journalism?”, 86.

³¹ Ibid., 86.

through with his philosophical musing on things like the apocalyptic nature of a book that always builds towards an end or his reflections on the nature of identity and humanity, all of which echoed the sentiments of his work without every repeating himself. However, he also possessed a quiet and understated sense of ironic humor directed at himself as much as others, referring to his research and writing styles as similar to that of his dog when he had smelled something particularly interesting. In fact, the transcriptions of his interviews and talks often note laughter in response to something that Sebald says. This comes through in his work.

For instance, in his 1995 *Rings of Saturn*, Sebald/the narrator is visiting The Hague so that he can look at the works of Rembrandt and is contemplating the cities claims to international justice, but Sebald suddenly realizes that he is hungry and pokes a bit of fun at himself and the city when he stops at McDonalds. Sebald wrote, “No longer able to decide on a place to eat, bought a carton of chips at McDonald’s, where I felt like a criminal wanted worldwide as I stood at the brightly lit counter, and ate them as I walked back to my hotel.”³² In the city of international justice, Sebald feels like an international criminal and recognizes the irony of his situation in a funny tangent. For Sebald, McDonald’s represented corporate greed, a lack of quality, and the opposite of the philosophical idealism that normally guided his prose, and yet he still stopped there for dinner out of convenience. The ironic awareness of the gap between idealism and reality creates Sebald’s signature humor in both his personality and his writing style and is a part of Sebald’s writing as a Gonzo historian.

However, the characteristic of a style heavily influenced by personality and worldview is not the only characteristic of a Gonzo style. Gonzo writing invites the reader behind the curtain of the stage of the final product. In the Kentucky Derby piece, Thompson begins with his arrival

³² W. G. Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, translated by Michael Hulse (New York: Harvill Press, 1998), 81.

in Kentucky and shows the reader how much he has been drinking, his accommodations, his family, and anything else he experienced, pausing only occasionally to reflect on the meaning of it all. The writing and research process and how Thompson experiences it becomes the bulk of the article so that the reader experiences the process with Thompson. This contrasts with traditional forms of journalism where the journalist takes the experience and the interviews, identifies the quotes and experiences that best convey what he or she wants to say, and puts that in the piece. Human nature and psychology always filters information, but Gonzo writing attempts to minimize this filtering, creating a piece that brings the reader and the raw information much closer together by minimizing the author's license to filter it.

Sebald's work also has a quality where he begins by explaining how he became interested in the topic at hand and then takes the reader with him on his research journey, which flows from topic to topic as they spark his interest until he discovers some larger connection and the work concludes. This lack of filtering is part of what produces works so reflective of the authorial personality, which affects what the author processes and how the author processes it.

Beyond these two important qualifications, there are no real rules to Gonzo because any further rules would restrict the fullness of personality and require filtration. Any work that obeys other conventions falls into the genre of those conventions and leaves the realm of Gonzo, which is why true Gonzo authors are as rare as they are hard to identify because no two can look really similar and still be Gonzo. As a historian, Sebald's work is quintessentially Gonzo because it violates so many conventions and refuses to conform to any other conventions. It is only as a Gonzo historian that Sebald was able to connect subjective perceptions of the present with the silences of the past to identify the points where traditional histories enabled the polarization of identity.

Significance

Sebald's works *On the History of Natural Destruction*³³ and *Campo Santo*³⁴ both contain historiographic essays that, in regards to the destruction of World War II, focus on the flaws within literary and historical methodology in the study of the German perspective. This topic had personal significance for Sebald since his father served in the German army during World War II and his mother witnessed the bombing of Nuremburg, yet both refused to discuss anything they witnessed from the 1930s through the end of the war. Sebald's writings were influenced by the conspiracy of silence that he felt along with many other Germans born at or near the end of World War II in 1945 as schools echoed the conspiracy of silence with few exceptions. Even when Sebald went to college at the University of Freiberg, he noticed a pointed avoidance of connecting anything within his world to the devastation of Germany during World War II. He did not feel that the bombings of Germany were unjustified, and he actually spends time analyzing the military history component of this. However, the tactical justification is not important when it comes to the fallout suffered by the country and culture in the face of ineffective remembrance. This memory issue bears the most fruit in the children of the survivors.

Post-war education in West³⁵ and East³⁶ Germany chose to focus on creating a correct way of talking about and perceiving the Third Reich and the Holocaust instead of addressing

³³ W. G. Sebald, *On the Natural History of Destruction*, translated by Anthea Bell (New York: The Modern Library, 2004).

³⁴ W. G. Sebald, *Campo Santo*.

³⁵ For West Germany this meant emphasizing German responsibility for the war and the Holocaust through documentaries in the 1960s as Allied and Holocaust histories of the war and the Holocaust respectively made German narratives of victimhood inadmissible (as I examine more closely on page 16-18). Part of Denazification in the West German zones of occupation included education reform and careful screening of teachers to prevent any resurgence of Nazism. (Helen Beckert, "The Effects of Denazification on Education in West Germany," (Bachelor's Honors Thesis, Murray State University, 2016), accessed May 28, 2016, <http://digitalcommons.murraystate.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1015&context=scholarsweek>.)

³⁶ In East Germany, this became part of a larger condemnation of capitalism in which the Third Reich was a prime example although German victimhood connected to bombings by the capitalist Great Britain and the United States was permissible (as I examine more closely on page 17). At the time, the Soviet Union was in control of East

deeper psychological issues. German social psychologist Harald Welzer keyed in on this with his 2008 study³⁷ of 40 East and West German families comparing the success of German education about the Third Reich and the Holocaust with the actual memory of the events from people who experienced it and their families. He notes that post-war Germans can talk about the Holocaust and the Third Reich in the politically correct way taught to them through memorials and school lesson.³⁸ However, this ability has nothing to do with their perceptions of family members who participated in these events.

In fact, their perception of their beloved family members so contrasts with their lessons about Germans who either participated or were apathetic to the events around them, that these post-war Germans tend to re-imagine the war stories that are told to paint their families as either victims of the Third Reich or heroes in spite of many stories these family members tell about their active participation in the events.³⁹ Here, in spite of attempts to respectfully memorialize the horrors of the Holocaust and the Nazi regime, the family context acts to separate memory from history and refuse the admittance of a history focused on victim narratives, further emphasizing the sense of an “other” Germany, which exists only in textbooks and memorials.

This silence would be echoed throughout Sebald’s childhood and even into college and contrasts with the way in which other countries. For instance, *Atlantic* writer Christopher Hitchens was born in the United Kingdom and remembers feeling pride at seeing evidence of the Blitzkrieg and knowing that his country had survived the Germany air raids as well as hearing

Germany, first as a part of denazification and then because East Germany was a part of the Soviet Block, so education had to reflect Stalinist ideals.

³⁷ Harald Welzer, "Collateral Damage of History Education: National Socialism and the Holocaust in German Family Memory," *Social Research* 75, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 287-314, *Business Source Premier*, EBSCOhost (accessed February 12, 2016).

³⁸ Ibid., 288-289.

³⁹ Ibid., 291-292.

dramatic stories war stories from his father.⁴⁰ For him, the war was a source of pride, affirmation of the past, and celebration.⁴¹

However, the nation of Germany had nothing to be proud of; nothing but defeat, a destroyed country, and the Holocaust haunted them in the aftermath. Rather than mourn the death and destruction of their country, West Germany threw itself into rebuilding and silenced the past. In 1946, reporter Stig Dagerman went to Germany representing a Swiss newspaper and wrote that as he rode a train from Hasselbrook to Landwehr, he saw, “the most horrifying expanse of ruins in the whole of Europe, he did not see a single living soul. The train... was crammed full, like all trains in Germany, but no one looked out of the windows, and he was identified as a foreigner himself *because* he looked out.”⁴² Germans, with few exceptions, strove to keep the past in the past and move on, but this presented a problem because, as with Christopher Hitchens, a critical part of identity is the sense of the past and Germany was trying to block out a huge part of theirs without ever mourning and processing it.

Beyond the anecdotal silence, Sebald also felt that historical accounts of World War II silenced German suffering during the war while highlighting only the Jewish elements of the Holocaust, creating a complex web of silences that vastly oversimplified the German role in World War II and the Holocaust. In 2006, Dr. Stefan Berger, who is currently the Director of the Institute for Social Movements at the German Ruhr University Bochum and a professor of social history at the university, identified the publications of W. G. Sebald, Günter Grass, and Jörg Friedrich as, “crucial in bringing about a debate about the status of German victims of the war in

⁴⁰ Christopher Hitchens, “The Wartime Toll on Germany,” *The Atlantic*: January/February 2003, accessed 27 April, 2016. <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2003/01/the-wartime-toll-on-germany/302661/>.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Sebald, *Natural History of Destruction*, 30.

the cultural memory of the nation.”⁴³ For Berger, figures like Sebald, who challenge homogenized conceptions of Germans as the perpetrators of the war, were critical in bringing the modern examination of German victimhood to the public’s attention.

However, Berger notes that this was not the first time that German victimhood had been a topic of discussion. In West Germany, the government, veterans, and German historians all worked to create the sense of a German victimhood that suffered from both Adolf Hitler and the Allies and this position would continue throughout the 1950s.⁴⁴ The 1960s and the involvement of the American and British historians brought about a shift by writing bombing histories from their perspective.⁴⁵ Ironically, the most well examined element of collective German victimhood was the expulsion of German citizens and ethnic Germans from Eastern European countries into Austria and Germany, which occurred from about 1944-1950 and involved the expulsion of somewhere between ten and eleven million Germans.⁴⁶

In contrast, in the German Democratic Republic (East Germany) the situation was more complicated. Due to its position in the Soviet Bloc and the political influence wielded by the Soviet Union, the GDR held different silences. In the GDR, the topics of German expulsion from fellow communist countries and the rape of women by the Soviet Red Army could not be broached because it would be seen as a criticism of the Soviet Union.⁴⁷ However, because the GDR had shifted from a capitalist society to a communist one and considered itself a different country entirely, “it denied all responsibility for the actions of the German Reich before

⁴³ Stefan Berger, “On Taboos, Traumas and Other Myths: Why the Debate of the Second World War is not a Historians’ Controversy,” in *Germans as Victims: Remembering the Past in Contemporary Germany*, edited by Bill Niven (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 211.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 213.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 214.

⁴⁶ R. M. Douglas, “The Expulsion Of The Germans: The Largest Forced Migration In History,” *Huffington Post*, 25 June 2002, accessed 12 May 2016, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/rm-douglas/expulsion-germans-forced-migration_b_1625437.html.

⁴⁷ Stefan Berger, “On Taboos, Traumas and Other Myths,” 215.

1945...the GDR sought to harness the bombing war as a tool in the ensuing Cold War.”⁴⁸ Since the GDR did not have to hold itself accountable for the atrocities of World War II, the language of the bombing victim narrative was exceptionally strong. The GDR villainized the British and American bombings as, “a devious plan to sabotage the rebuilding of a socialist Germany, Dresden, in particular, was used extensively to hammer home this message.”⁴⁹ Just as future histories would villainize the German of the thirties and forties and the German culture, which must have produced him, the fifties were a time of villainizing the allies for what they had done to Germany without any sense of personal accountability.

By the 1960s, histories written by the United States and Great Britain about World War II and the flourishing of Holocaust histories made German victim narratives inadmissible in West Germany. Sebald was sixteen in 1960 and missed the era of German victim history and literature although he would later go back and criticize what was written.

Even as recently as 2013, University of Exeter history professor and leading World War II expert Richard Overy points out that, “The survival of German society under the bombs has generally attracted less attention than explanations of British survival during the Blitz.”⁵⁰ This is in spite of the fact that the British lost approximately 67,100 civilians in the entire war⁵¹ in comparison with the 48,572 civilians killed in the bombings of Hamburg alone.⁵² In all, 131 towns and cities in Germany were bombed at least once by the Allies (United States Air Force and the British Royal Air Force), resulting in approximately 600,000 civilian deaths.⁵³ As

⁴⁸ Ibid., 215.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 215.

⁵⁰ Richard Overy, *The Bombers and the Bombing: Allied Air War Over Europe, 1940-1945* (New York: Viking, 2013), 232.

⁵¹ “By the Numbers: World-Wide Deaths,” *The National WWII Museum*, accessed 2 May 2016. <http://www.nationalww2museum.org/learn/education/for-students/ww2-history/ww2-by-the-numbers-world-wide-deaths>.

⁵² Overy, *The Bombers and the Bombing*, 260.

⁵³ Sebald, *On the Natural History of Destruction*, 3.

Hitchens points out, “most people outside Germany itself still tend to shrug at the horror, if they agree to discuss it at all, as if to say, Well, what goes around comes around.”⁵⁴ Sebald was not criticizing a lack of victim narratives, per say, in Germany although he would have been unaware of this scholarship until after it had been stigmatized for its minimization of German guilt in the war since he was born in 1944. Rather he criticized the unbalanced nature of it, which eluded constructive discussions. If one views the Germans as just victims or just perpetrators, then the discussion ends with a trite recognition that that event in discussion was terrible and life goes on. The experience is dehumanized because the people involved are no longer relatable, regardless of what did or did not occur, which prevents the reader of such a history from engaging with the topic, discussing it with others, and really understanding what occurred in the first place.

In 1982, Sebald wrote *Between History and Natural History: On the Literary Description of Total Destruction*.⁵⁵ He criticizes such esteemed authors as Wolfgang Borchert and Paul Celan for writing works, “of relatively slight value as a source of information on the objective reality of the time, more particularly the devastation of the German cities and the patterns of psychological and social behavior affected by it.”⁵⁶ Rather than recording Germany as it was in a way that would serve a social and historical function, Sebald felt that they had just written narratives of only literary value and thus failed the German people in processing what had occurred, mourning it, and learning to incorporate it into a new German identity.

Sebald does find a small collection of works to praise because they, “reacted to the collective experience of the destruction of whole tracts of human life.”⁵⁷ If the narratives of

⁵⁴ Hitchens, “The Wartime Toll on Germany.”

⁵⁵ Sebald, “Between History and Natural History: On the Literary Description of Total Destruction,” in *Campo Santo*, 65-95.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 67.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 68.

destruction of human life moved beyond the narrative of victim-perpetrator, then it would unite humanity against the destruction itself and actually cause a positive change. The works that were needed, according to Sebald, should have the identifiable quality of literature and be written with that level of skill, but they should also be real and unflinchingly honest because the greater strength of literature is its ability to illicit an empathic response in the reader. However, even the works that Sebald analyzes as praiseworthy (*The End* by Hans Erich Nossack and *The City Beyond the River* by Herman Kasack) fell short of his ideals because of their tendency to mythologize and become internal.

Sebald's examination of *The End* also hits on a key point in Post-War German culture. Nossack wrote that the allied bombings were, "the work of divine justice."⁵⁸ The sense of guilt for contributing to the horror of what Germany did and a need to atone for atrocities, which cannot possibly be atoned for, effectively silenced Germany by making it seem, much as Hitchens said, that Germany had no right to mourn or feel grief for that all that it had lost in the wake of all that it had taken. This is a key influence for Sebald who never presents a purely innocent victim or a purely evil perpetrator in any of his works but always shows instances where the subject was a victim with instances when the subject was a perpetrator or vice versa.

Sebald would continue this topic in various forms throughout his career including various classes taught at the University of East Anglia, the Zurich Lectures of 1997 and his 1999 work *On the Natural History of Destruction*.⁵⁹ Sebald specifically emphasizes natural history whenever discussing his philosophy as noted is in the title of both his works on the topic of Germany as destroyer and destroyed. Natural history traditionally resides in the realm of science

⁵⁸ Ibid., 74.

⁵⁹ W. G. Sebald, *On the Natural History of Destruction*, translated by Anthea Bell (New York: The Modern Library, 2004).

because it began and is still considered to be the study of plants and animals in their natural environment through observation rather than experimentation. Sebald did feel inspired by this traditional definition in his later works such as *The Rings of Saturn* and *Austerlitz* where he uses nature and natural history to construct miniature environmental histories and draw out larger themes in the works by allusion.

However, one of Germany's key philosophical and socially critical figures, Theodor Adorno⁶⁰ posited a more historical interpretation of the term, which Sebald utilized to a much greater extent. Professor Max Pensky, who chaired the Department of Philosophy at Binghamton University from 2009-2015, identified Adorno's philosophy as having three key elements. First, "a pervasive and ultimately paralyzing sense of dread and helplessness in the face of a homogenous and virtually irresistible history of domination, and a corollary sense of capitulation at the vision of world history as continuous catastrophe."⁶¹ Adorno felt that history tended towards a record of destruction that polarized victims and perpetrators. This polarization then contributed to a retrospective paralysis, leading to an acceptance of the world as a pileup of destructive catastrophes. This is one of the central elements of what history naturally is because history in the form that the Harvard Writing Center describes⁶² it must remain paralyzed in its natural environment, the past.

However, Sebald recognized that the past had an afterlife in the way in which its representations and resultant perceptions affected the present. His Gonzo history style allowed him to bring those subjective perceptions of the past together with literary and thus humanized

⁶⁰ Lambert Zuidervart, "Theodor W. Adorno," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2015 Edition), editor Edward N. Zalta, accessed 25 May 2016, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2015/entries/adorno/>.

⁶¹ Max Pensky, "Natural History: The Life and Afterlife of a Concept in Adorno," *Critical Horizons* 5, no. 1 (April 2004), *Academic Search Premier*, EBSCOhost, 229.

⁶² See pages 4-9.

narratives of the past to create new realities that prevented history's natural polarization. In doing so, Sebald hoped to subvert the "continuous catastrophe." The natural historian then has a responsibility to avoid the "natural" path of destruction in his or her writing and furthermore to avoid capitulating to its paralyzing properties.

The second element of the natural history genre aids in this charge by requiring that the natural historian provide "even the most abstract of his [the natural historian's] subjects with an emotional charge, an affective dimension of feeling...that renders virtually all of his texts 'subjective'."⁶³ This inherent sense of the subjective that imbues everything with feeling creates a metaphorical sense of importance in everything in a piece of writing, which was important to both Adorno and Sebald. Even Sebald's academic essays have as many personal stories and musings as they do historical facts. The element of emotion helps to combat the natural paralysis and homogenization of history by providing a sympathetic connection between reader and subject. This requisite subjectivism echoes the standards of Gonzo and reiterates how important it is to include the subjective perceptions that shape the narrative itself so as to lessen the distance between the reader and the raw history.

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, natural history has an "inner resistance to 'summarization.'"⁶⁴ Because Sebald was so horrified by the homogenization of identity perception, his writings actively resist being summarized. The inability to summarize Sebald's history prevents the homogenization of victim and perpetrator, particularly when supporting and being supported by the subjective elements of natural history to assist in combating history's natural tendency to paralyze. Instead, Sebald chose characters and histories that contradicted

⁶³ Ibid., 229.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 229.

contemporary generalizations and then included contradictions within his writings of the characters and histories to prevent those from being generalized as well.

When James E. Young, a professor of English and Judaic studies at University of Massachusetts, served on the panel to choose the design for the “Memorial for the Murdered Jews of Europe” in Berlin, he said, “Better a thousand years of Holocaust memorial competitions and exhibitions in Germany than any single ‘final solution’ to Germany’s memory problem.”⁶⁵ The idea being that once something is felt to be understood and properly remembered, regardless of the accuracy of the feeling since nothing in history can ever be fully understood without a time machine and an ability to comprehend the experiences of anyone in a given time, it becomes oversimplified and loses its living connection to modernity. This is the fear of Sebald and Adorno, that a simplified and disconnected version of the past will take root in the minds of modernity and guide its perceptions of nations, ethnicities, and religions, creating a disconnected sense of a known “Other” that circumvents compassion, curiosity, and understanding.

Otherness in the Works of Sebald

The “Other” is a dehumanized figure created by an oversimplified generalization of national, ethnic, or religious identity created by a group, which defines itself in contrast to this “Other.” The danger, as Nobel Laureate Toni Morrison points out in her work *Playing in the Dark*,⁶⁶ is that this targeted group can become a scapegoat for the problems of the dominant society defining them, and because of their lack of “human” status, this “Other” can then be subject to sub-human treatment as has been done historically. The concept of “other” has worked its way into many different philosophies without one recognizing the other. Morrison focused on

⁶⁵ James E. Young, *At Memory's Edge*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000), 191.

⁶⁶ Toni Morrison expounds much further on this concept of “Other” and its critical role in literature in her work *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992).

the African-American “Other” and how that related to perceptions of whiteness. In contrast, Sebald’s “Other” is time-related, focusing on how the World War II German who did not actively resist the Third Reich, Nazism, and the Holocaust became an “Other” to the detriment of modern German identity. Edward Said examines the Middle Eastern “Other” in relation to western society and colonialism in his work *Orientalism*.⁶⁷

Sebald challenges this notion of “Other” to some extent in all of his works, but he does it in distinctly different ways. In *After Nature*, Sebald takes the time to nuance the German identity both before and after World War II with two biographical sections and one autobiographical section, creating a counter to any perception that Adolf Hitler and his actions were any kind of inevitable result of German history and culture. In *The Emigrants*, Sebald places the biographies of three Germans and one Lithuanian side-by-side in a post-World War II world giving the reader a sense of the complexities of being a victim and perpetrator in Germany during World War II and contrasting that with the biography of the Lithuanian, who spent much of his life in England and served on the sides of the allies. Lastly, *The Rings of Saturn* greatly expands this challenge to notions of otherness with miniature histories that touch on dozens of countries throughout the world, showing them as both victims and perpetrators, often simultaneously, with elements of culture and day-to-day existence thrown in to create histories that resist generalizations and formulations of an “Other.”

Philosophical Basis

Going forward into analysis of Sebald’s popular works, it is important to keep the complex philosophies in mind. Sebald’s works are all characterized as having a tone of

⁶⁷ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Random House, 1979).

melancholy⁶⁸ although the melancholy comes through most strongly in *The Rings of Saturn*. By approaching his work with a melancholy tone that has a tendency to make subtle turns to the ironic in moments of criticism, Sebald conveys the feeling of natural history. In fact, in *The Rings of Saturn*, Sebald's only history which veered sharply away from the form of biography, Sebald wrote, "On every new thing there lies already the shadow of annihilation."⁶⁹ Here Sebald fully acknowledged that the course of history followed the natural path that Adorno identified of creating polarized victim-perpetrator narratives of destruction. He also acknowledged that these polarized narratives created the foundation for the next annihilation/destruction, which Adorno attributed to the paralyzing effects of such narratives. The foundation of destruction, for Adorno and Sebald, lay in the allowance of history's natural course without resistance.

The natural historian resists creating a foundation of destruction by objectively acknowledging the natural path of history and then countering it with a subjective perspective that emotionally charged the subjects. This helps the reader to connect with the history and prevents paralyzing the reader and polarizing of the subject. This subjectivity came quite easily for Sebald with his Gonzo approach and helped him avoid creating new "Others" by emotionally charging each subject and resisting generalization with subjects holding both victim and perpetrator roles. However, in his role as Gonzo historian, Sebald also added a literary element that actively resisted historical conventions and was not included in Adorno's natural history convention.

While a literary analysis is beyond the scope and historical discipline of this paper, Sebald did make a point of crafting his historical narrative with a rich interplay with other

⁶⁸ Tone, in a literary sense, refers to an author's attitude towards the subject of his writing or to the reader of it. Melancholy is connotatively defined as depression and was historically associated with artistic inspiration. However, denotatively, the term expands beyond the confines of depression to include an element of pensiveness.

⁶⁹Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, 23-24.

literary figures, artfully complex sentence structures, and an original use of uncaptioned black and white images. These artistic choices fall into the realm of literary analysis but do move beyond Adorno's basic requirements of resistance to summary and subjective portrayals of emotionally charged subjects. This Sebaldian signature in his Gonzo style creates an even larger web of complex connections and invites the discipline of literature to spend time challenging history's natural tendency to homogenize. This stylistic element is just another way that Sebald brings history into a larger scope of relevance by appealing to a broader audience.

All of these elements work together in Sebald's writing to struggle against the perceived silences he first noticed in his childhood in Germany. After moving to England, Sebald realized that he actually felt at home nowhere except the Île Saint-Pierre, Switzerland where he felt it was a bit like the ark with one of everything and too small for the silences of anything except nature.⁷⁰ It was only with this newly objective distance that he came to recognize a larger failing created by historical convention's inability to push back against the natural perception of history as Adorno defined it.

After Nature

*After Nature*⁷¹ specifically responds to the creation of a German "Other" by identifying three imperfect yet powerfully unique German figures; two of the figures are from before the extreme destruction of the twentieth century, and the other is Sebald himself. The work is done in poetic form and is Sebald's only poetry publication of such length and specific subject matter. Sebald dedicated a collection of poems, each poem between one and seven pages long, to each of the subjects. All three subjects are also German, consisting of the Renaissance German painter

⁷⁰ *Patience (After Sebald)*, directed by Grant Gee (New York: Cinema Guild, 2012. DVD).

⁷¹ W. G. Sebald, *After Nature*, translated by Michael Hamburger (New York: The Modern Library, 2002).

Matthias Grunewald, the German Enlightenment scientist Gerog Wilhelm Steller, and Sebald himself as a representative of a modern German author.

The larger work then becomes a study of particular ages in Germany, what those ages produced, and what it truly means to be German in direct counterpoint to the homogenized perpetrator of World War II. This work is Sebald's first literary publication and also sets the foundation for his investigation into the conspiracy of silence in his novels. It also creates higher ideals for both art that Sebald will try and live up to in his work. *After Nature* employs another historical philosophy, that of microhistory. When addressing the importance of microhistories,⁷² Carlo Ginzburg said, "What is relevant in microhistory is the possibility of having an intensive study of a case, which would lead to a better generalization."⁷³ Sebald uses these three microhistories in *After Nature* to create a better generalization of German identity, but Sebald would also have added to Ginzburg's definition that while the microhistories do improve generalizations, they never perfect them so the work of the microhistorian is to never stop improving the generalization lest the generalization be accepted and an "other" created.

The first section of *After Nature* creates a biography of Matthias Grunewald, who was born in 1470 and died in 1528. Like most of Sebald's subjects, Grunewald received no scholarly attention until about 1900 when French writer Joris-Karl Huysmans brought Grunewald to modern attention as a relevant artist.⁷⁴ Grunewald fits into the conspiracy of silence that plagued Sebald because his work was ignored by scholarship for so long even as he did gain recognition in modernity. Grunewald also brings in the critical component of challenging homogenized

⁷² Microhistory: a historical narrative on a micro scale examining either the life of an individual, a village or some small scale event in great detail to facilitate an analytic approach to history.

⁷³ Serious Science, "Carlo Ginzburg – Microhistory," Online video clip, YouTube, YouTube, June 25, 2015, Web, May 25, 2016.

⁷⁴ Dorteia Von Mucke, "History and the Work of Art in Sebald's *After Nature*," *Nonsite*, no. 1 (January 25, 2011), accessed April 25, 2016, <http://nonsite.org/article/sebalds-after-nature-authorship-at-the-threshold-of-representation>.

perception because of his artistic style. Huysmans wanted to bring attention to Grunewald because of his, “shocking insistence on the physical details of Christ’s suffering, alerting its beholder to the disgusting marks of torture and signs of dying and decomposing flesh.”⁷⁵ Grunewald refused the oversimplification of Christ as a figure of veneration whose image needed to match this at all times. Instead, he chose to portray Christ in all his complexity by giving real details about Christ as he would have appeared in whatever historical moment Grunewald was commissioned to paint. Grunewald’s piece also provides a counter to the accepted generalization of Christ at the time, which is why it was silenced in the first place.

However, even in this artist whom Sebald admired and praised, he raises a counter lest Grunewald, and by extension Germany, become idealized. In a poem of five pages, Sebald examines the persecution of Jews in Frankfurt, beginning in 1240 and leading into Grunewald’s own life there.⁷⁶ In it, 173 Jews were killed in 1240; in 1349 there was a massacre in the Jewish quarter (presumably they had already been moved into a ghetto); and in the mid-fifteenth century, Grunewald’s lifetime, Jews wore yellow rings to identify them as Jewish and to prevent carnal intercourse between Jews and Christians on pain of death.⁷⁷ In spite of this, Grunewald married a woman who was Jewish and converted to Christianity although, according to Sebald, Grunewald’s depiction of women as always veiled seems to imply some conflict of feeling about his marriage to a former Jew.

While Grunewald may not have been studied by scholars for many years, his altarpieces are displayed throughout Germany and influenced countless individuals who saw them. Each individual presents a unique microcosm of the culture that produced them and in doing so also

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Sebald, *After Nature*, 12-16.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 12-13.

produced culture. By attempting to box Grunewald, and by extension German culture, into a polarized narrative of a great man rising above his times or a weak man sinking in them, the scholar reduces the importance of simply observing Grunewald and appreciating him for his failings and his triumphs.

Similarly, the biography of Georg Wilhelm Steller shows a man of scientific genius and determination who went on the first European expedition to Alaska, which unfortunately shipwrecked and stranded the crew there for the winter. During his time there, Steller named a number of creatures after him and managed to save much of the crew from starvation and scurvy with his knowledge as a natural scientist and physician. However, Steller's exploration and discovery of new species also resulted in many hunting-related extinctions in the following century. Steller was estranged from his wife and ambitious when it came to promoting himself although he largely failed in this endeavor as well. Steller is yet another example of an imperfect German with moments of greatness and moments of failure, which become difficult to appreciate in an objective telling. Yet Sebald's willingness to utilize the subjective aspects of his Gonzo genre also meant that he could tell the story of Steller's life with a literary flair that allows the reader to experience Steller's dilemmas, struggles, and triumphs, regardless of whether the reader agrees with them. Sebald's approach humanizes Steller's life.

Sebald's own section further emphasizes the importance of an imperfect human depiction that resists generalization and promotes more compassionate and connective responses. Sebald begins with a story about his grandparents meeting and subsequent marriage⁷⁸ before continuing onto his parents referencing their meeting and marriage.⁷⁹ Sebald notes that his father saw Dresden before and after it was bombed but claims to have no memory of it, just as his mother

⁷⁸ Ibid., 83-84.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 85.

saw the bombing of Nuremburg while in Furth but, “cannot recall now/what the burning town looked like/or what her feelings were/at this site.”⁸⁰ This is the root of Sebald’s sense of a conspiracy of silence. His family was a part of the German perpetrator years, yet Sebald felt that they refused to remember them and deprived him of a crucial part his national and familial identity in the process.

Later in life, with the presence of documentaries and the flourishing scholarship on the Holocaust in the 1960s, Sebald got some sense of the destruction of the time period and yet there were still silences and none of it was constructive. His bafflement as he struggled to understand this part of his national identity while simultaneously rejecting it and moving to England shows Sebald in the same unflinching vulnerability that he forced on Steller and Grunewald. Sebald’s experience highlights some of the problems of the first post-war generation of Germany as it struggled to reconcile the perception of loved parents with the unrelatable horror of World War II and the Holocaust as it was taught in school.

The Emigrants

After Nature dances around the issues of being German during World War II and its aftereffects, but *The Emigrants* addresses the issue head on with four biographical short stories of individuals who were a part of it. For the purposes of this paper and efficiency, Ambros Adelwarth will be left out because he is a German emigrant who spent most of his time in the United States and represents Sebald’s uncle, so the information is more valuable in an autobiographical sense than any other and not within the purview of this paper. The character of Max Ferber will also be excluded because he is actually a composite biography of two individuals that Sebald knew, and as such the writing only presents interest as a case study in

⁸⁰ Ibid., 96.

Gonzo writing, which is also outside of the purview of this paper as well. All of the individuals written about were emigrants tied to World War II in a way that they found difficult to accept, three of them were of Jewish descent, and all four became suicidal at an advanced age.

The first biography is that of Dr. Henry Selwyn, Sebald's absentminded landlord. Selwyn move from Lithuania to Great Britain to study medicine at Cambridge and served in India during World War I. Selwyn refused to talk about his experiences regarding World War II and shoots himself at the end of the narrative with a hunting rifle he had purchased in India so that he might fit in better even though he had never gone hunting with it. The biography is a sad story of a man incapable of coping with the violence of his era even though he struggled mightily to do so.

This contrasts with the next biography of Armin Mueller, whom Sebald gave the pseudonym of Paul Bereyter. Bereyter/Mueller was Sebald's primary school teacher, but during Sebald's time as his student, Sebald had no idea that Bereyter/Mueller had been classified as mixed race (Mueller was one-quarter Jewish) and lost his job as a teacher in the nineteen-thirties because of it, or that he had been conscripted to serve in the Wehrmacht. But in January of 1984, Sebald received news from Germany that Bereyter/Mueller had killed himself.⁸¹ In *The Emigrants*, Sebald read about Bereyter's life and career as a teacher in an article about the suicide entitled "Grief at the Loss of a Popular Teacher,"⁸² which all fit with Sebald's memories except for the curious statement that, "during the Third Reich Paul Bereyter had been prevented from practicing his chosen profession."⁸³ This bothers Sebald to the point that he chooses to investigate the entire matter only to find that, as with most of childhood, no one was willing to reveal whatever the small and sleepy town of Sonthofen knew about Bereyter's inability to teach

⁸¹ Sebald, *The Emigrants*, 27.

⁸² Ibid., 27.

⁸³ Ibid., 27.

during the Third Reich.⁸⁴ It is only when Sebald ran into Bereyter's friend Mme Landau that he finally got answers to add to his fond recollections of Bereyter as his own teacher.

Sebald discovered that Bereyter had lost his job as a schoolteacher because he was one-quarter Jewish. At this point, Bereyter moved to France for a short time but quickly ran into similar prejudices and went to Berlin⁸⁵ because "he was a German to the marrow, profoundly attached to his native land."⁸⁶ He was then conscripted into the German army⁸⁷ and served for the entirety of the war. After the war, Bereyter went right back to teaching in Sonthofen⁸⁸ and the topic of his Jewishness, loss of job, and service in the army were all swept under the rug. Although Bereyter eventually moved to Switzerland, he kept his home in Sonthofen, just a day's drive from his Swiss home, and visited Germany frequently for the remainder of his life.

Bereyter and Selwyn both represent the silences that followed in the wake of World War II where certain parts of a person's life became inadmissible to their constructed identity, creating one source of the larger silences. The people of Sonthofen silenced the tragedy of Bereyter's existence during the Third Reich because acknowledging their alienation of Bereyter and acceptance of the Nuremberg Laws⁸⁹ and the racial ideology associated with it meant acknowledging their personal connection to the "Other" German. Since much of Germany's ability to move forward relied on the alienated existence of the German perpetrator as "Other," Bereyter's suffering had to be silenced. Bereyter silenced it as well because he could not cope

⁸⁴ Ibid., 28.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 55.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 57.

⁸⁷ Sebald, *The Emigrants*, 55.

⁸⁸ Sebald and his family moved to Sonthofen when he was eight because it was where Sebald's father worked.

⁸⁹ The Nuremberg Laws, passed in 1935, created the legal foundation defining Jews, and later other minorities, as inferior to Aryan Germans. This legalized the Holocaust and all its associated horrors while facilitating the ostracism of anyone descended from any of the defined minorities.

with it. Selwyn silenced his own memories of World War II and whatever his involvement was because it did not fit with his own identity of a peaceful man.

Along with the narratives of silence, there is also the issue of German identity so poignantly brought up by the biography of Bereyter. Bereyter felt his German identity so strongly that not even the reign of the Third Reich could keep him away from his home, yet he was also one-quarter Jewish and suffered from the racism against Jews and the dictatorship of Hitler that forced him to serve in an army while Nazi reign inflicted horrors on Jews and other minorities. Bereyter is a victim but also a German soldier that comprises part of that homogenized German identity of perpetrator. He also perpetrated the silence of constructive perspectives in Germany in the wake of World War II because he could not cope with it, simultaneously making it almost impossible for the first post-War generation Germans he taught to cope with the German past. The dualism of the image that further pushes at historical generalizations and demands revision is the essence of what a microhistory should be. *The Emigrants* challenges the perceptions of a German “Other” and generates new questions about guilt and responsibility for the German “other” during World War II.

The Rings of Saturn

While early works such as *After Nature* and *The Emigrants* focus on the issues of a modern German identity and the German “Other,” Sebald expanded the range and content of his theory in his 1995 work *The Rings of Saturn*.⁹⁰ The novel is set in August 1992 in the county of Suffolk, England and followed Sebald as he walked in an attempt to fill the emptiness that resulted from the finishing of his novel.⁹¹ The next two-hundred-and-ninety-six pages detail the

⁹⁰ Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 3.

myriad of things Sebald contemplates on his journey including landscape, space, time, history, images, people, and landmarks.

The physical journey bears minimal importance in comparison with his contemplations. Sebald managed to connect the destruction of herring populations⁹² with the nineteenth-century Taiping rebellion⁹³, the Holocaust in Croatia,⁹⁴ and the rape of Nanking.⁹⁵ In a section titled “the natural history of the herring,” Sebald outlines the social significance of herring in England and the lives of the fisherman who depend on them before explaining that, “now that fishing no longer affords a living, the fisherman are dying out. No one is interested in their legacy.”⁹⁶ This poignant quote foreshadows the various kinds of histories that Sebald wished to bring into the light of day: histories of importance that are silenced because no one is interested in their legacies. The following pages go on to explain that due to various pollutions, fish are dying out and mutating before explaining just how it is that herring are fished. Sebald explains that fish are caught using nets but that the fish can struggle mightily for hours so that, “herring fishing [is] regarded as a supreme example of mankind’s struggle with the power of Nature.”⁹⁷ Sebald also goes on to note that some scientists became curious about how tough the herring were and sought the answer by mutilating the fish until they died as part of a scientific study.⁹⁸ The experimentation calls to mind the medical experimentation on Holocaust victims in the concentration camps.

The Rings of Saturn also examines the systematic exploitation of silk worms for thousands of years across the globe and abuses of nature as a historical phenomenon always

⁹² Ibid., 51-59.

⁹³ Ibid., 137-142.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 96-97.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 137-142.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 52-53.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 54.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 57.

appear in his work. This also pulls in his love of natural history in general with his work on Steller and his theories on natural history and destruction.

However, this particular example also ties in with history and genocide as Sebald begins to unveil the number of herring that were fished even before pollution began to further destroy the species. Indeed, he even cites that approximately sixty billion were caught annually even after the pollution and that, “the natural historians sought consolation in the idea that humanity was responsible for only a fraction of the endless destruction wrought in the life cycle.”⁹⁹ Natural historians portray this callous attitude in an echo of the attitude that now circulates regarding collateral damage, a term Sebald saw as symptomatic of the larger problems that had resulted from history and literature that lacked impact in regards to the destruction that humanity had become capable of in World War I and the years following it. Sebald transitions over into the next section, in case any reader has missed the criticism on the value of life and its connection to the destruction of the 20th century, to talk about the death of Major George Wyndham Le Strange, who served in World War II and helped to liberate the concentration camp Bergen Belsen¹⁰⁰ although again he chooses a camp that is not quite famous to reference, hinting at those muted and silenced voices of history.

Later, while in his hotel in Southwold, the narrator/Sebald recalls a visit to The Hague,¹⁰¹ a city in South Holland, where he intended to view the painting of *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicholas Tulp* because it has long been a preoccupation of his. This is something a reader would recognize as true considering that the narrator/Sebald spends six pages talking about the image and includes two different illustrations of it in the first chapter of *The Rings of Saturn*. However,

⁹⁹ Ibid., 57.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 59.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 80-89.

The Hague has other connotations. It is self-described as the international city of peace and justice because the city has approximately 160 international organizations dedicated to either peace or justice including the International Court of Justice, which is the judicial branch of the United Nations.¹⁰² This chapter sets the stage for much of the novel. The destruction of the herring and Germany, which nobody seems interested in seeking justice for have already been introduced, and crimes that would interest the International Criminal Court, also located in The Hague are about to be brought into the reader's viewing. In this way, Sebald sets himself and *The Rings of Saturn* as an advocate for social justice by means of historical remembrance.

It is in this task that he echoes sharply Michel-Rolph Trouillot's theories of power and production of history. His work *Silencing the Past*¹⁰³ examines how those in positions of power control which narratives get told, silencing others in the process. According to Trouillot, there are four points of silencing in the process that produces history. The first is source creation, the type, volume, and quality of sources created determines the available scope of the next three steps in the process and any agents, actors, or subjects that do not produce sources are producing silences. The next is the making of archives. Source selection, preservation, organization, and labeling along with the knowledge and helpfulness of the archivist will determine which history narratives can be told. But archivists have the limitations of their worldview, their organization's worldview, funding, and space to consider, which means that they will choose not to preserve certain things as a judgement call based on the aforementioned factors, creating even more silences.

¹⁰² "Home Page," The Hague, accessed April 25, 2016, <http://www.denhaag.nl/en.htm>.

¹⁰³ Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995).

Then the historian takes archival material and creates a narrative that excludes some material and favors others in the reductive process of research writing, creating another set of silences. Lastly, the historian will choose to situate the material within retrospect and determine its significance, which requires a situation of the history within a selected amount of archival work and a relation to larger bodies of scholarship. This historiography invariably misses some dialogues and under or over appreciates the materials identified in the historiography, creating more silences for the next historian to correct.

Ideology and politics equally influence which sources are created and identified as being created as well as the archival formation, so they carry through to narrative creation that is informed by an individual's interests which are informed by political and ideological beliefs and framed by the political and ideological beliefs of the historical framework that the narrative is placed in. For instance, narratives of Jewish collaboration in the Holocaust have been frequently silenced, particularly when compared with something like African collaboration in colonial period slavery. These silences create an active injustice in the record of history where the truth becomes skewed and the last consolation that a victim can have, that of remembrance, becomes lost.

A provocative case of silences that Sebald introduced to the reader is the case of Kurt Waldheim. During World War II, the Croatian Ustasha in conjunction with the Wehrmacht (German Army) enacted the Holocaust in Croatia targeting Serbs, Jews, and Bosnians and other minorities. Sebald briefly sketches this out in conjunction with an article he is reading at The Crown while waiting for tea. This leads to further ruminations about the damage done by the Ustasha and how this could have affected people in their contemporary existences. Then Sebald wrote:

But no one knows what shadowy memories haunt them to this day. In this connection one might also add that one of the Heeresgruppe E intelligence officers at that time was a young Viennese lawyer whose chief task was to draw up memoranda relating to the necessary resettlements, describes as imperative for humanitarian reasons. For this commendable paperwork he was awarded by the Croatian head of state Ante Pavelić the silver medal of the crown of King Zvonimir, with oak leaves. In the post-war years this officer, who at the very start of his career was so promising and so very competent in the technicalities of administration, occupied various high offices, among them that of Secretary General of the United Nations. And reportedly it was in this last capacity that he spoke onto tape, for the benefit of any extra-terrestrials that may happen to share our universe, words of greeting that are now, together with other memorabilia of mankind, approaching the outer limits of our solar system aboard the space probe Voyager II.¹⁰⁴

This section is first and foremost Gonzo in that all of Sebald's supposition and hearsay became admissible as a part of the narrative because the Gonzo form is all about keeping the reader and the author's process of learning and thought as close together as possible within the realms of human fallibility. The case of Kurt Waldheim is particularly interesting and oddly current for Sebald because *The Rings of Saturn* was published in 1995, but in 1993 Eli M. Rosenbaum¹⁰⁵ and professional author William Hoffer published *Betrayal: The Untold Story of the Kurt Waldheim Investigation and Cover Up*.¹⁰⁶ The book examines the initial investigation of Kurt Waldheim in mid-1980s and accused Nazi hunter and Holocaust survivor Simon Wiesenthal of minimizing the amount of exposure Waldheim was subjected to. At the end of World War II, Austrian-born Waldheim had claimed to have served in the Wehrmacht until 1941 on the Russian front where he was shot. From there, Waldheim claimed to have returned to Vienna where he studied to be a lawyer. On this basis, Waldheim became the United Nations

¹⁰⁴ Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, 98-99.

¹⁰⁵ The Deputy Director of the Office of Special Investigations, which is the task force for the investigation and the prosecution of Nazi war criminals

¹⁰⁶ Eli M. Rosenbaum and William Hoffer, *Betrayal: The Untold Story of the Kurt Waldheim Investigation and Cover Up* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993).

Secretary General from 1972-1981 and during the time of the investigations, he was in the running for the Presidency of Austria.

The initial investigation, which Wiesenthal and Rosenbaum both participated in, concluded that after 1941, Waldheim continued to serve Germany in the Waffen-SS in Croatia coordinating with the Ustasha. His level of involvement was left fairly murky, and while Waldheim was ostracized by those outside of Austria, he was still selected for the position of presidency although he did not seek re-election. In the 1993 book, Rosenbaum accuses Wiesenthal of covering up the depth of Waldheim's involvement in the Waffen-SS to preserve his own reputation. He also claims that Waldheim played a central role in the Holocaust in the Balkans and the decision making there. Both Wiesenthal and Rosenbaum have exceptional reputations in the field of Nazi hunting and strongly denounce each other's claims about the Waldheim case although Rosenbaum seems to have more evidence.

The fact that Sebald even mentions the space probe Voyager II recording indicates his knowledge of the debates surrounding Waldheim since that recording is only mentioned in a few obscure articles, so Sebald must have researched him. Sebald mentions Waldheim as an interesting connection with memories that haunt the people involved in Croatia "to this day." Waldheim lived until 2007, implying that in spite of the Rosenbaum-Wiesenthal investigations, Sebald does not see Waldheim as evil or without a conscious. Looking beyond the scandal of Nazism, Waldheim was a huge proponent of peace during his postwar career.

From 1964-1968 he was the Chairman of the Committee for the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space and in 1968 served as the president of the first United Nations Conference on the Exploration and Peaceful Uses of Outer Space.¹⁰⁷ In his time as Secretary-General for the United

¹⁰⁷ "Former Secretary-General: Kurt Waldheim," UN News Center, 2014, accessed May 25, 2016, <http://www.un.org/sg/formersg/waldheim.shtml>.

Nations, he made it a practice to visit areas of special concern including South Africa, Namibia, Cyprus, Syria, Lebanon, Pakistan, Egypt, and many others.¹⁰⁸ He also made a point of checking up on relief projects and facilitated peace talks in many of the aforementioned countries.¹⁰⁹ In fact, before the 1980s investigation, Waldheim was viewed as a role model for humanitarianism and did immeasurable good in the world. Waldheim presents an excellent case for Sebald's demand for multi-dimensional histories that resist generalization because Sebald shows the humanitarian Waldheim of the United Nations and the perpetrator Waldheim of Croatian genocide. These parts of Waldheim cannot be reconciled into one identity, and he should not be seen as one or the other but rather a flawed human being who did horrible things and great things, a fitting representation of humanity for any extra-terrestrials to meet.

Conclusion

Sebald realized that the complexity of human nature with all its potential for failure and greatness suffered under history's natural tendency to polarize its subjects through generalization. This polarization was only emphasized by the historical conventions as Sebald witnessed growing up in Germany. The point was driven home as a more universal truth in his time in England as he studied a broader range of historical subjects. Utilizing the techniques of Gonzo writing and its ability to convey complex and subjective perceptions of reality alongside the objective depiction of the roots of those perceptions, Sebald strove to realize a genre of history that responded to the silences and constantly refined the generalizations of history to prevent creations of an "Other." In doing so, Sebald reimagined many historical conventions and negated others while employing the technique of microhistory combined with complex integrations of contradictory histories in works such as *The Emigrants*, *After Nature*, and *The*

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

Rings of Saturn to highlight the multi-dimensional nature of people, nations, and nature. He also used the subjective bent of Gonzo writing that allowed him to include personal feelings, ideas, and memories to invite a more compassionate connection with the subjects of his histories. Sebald was a historian of the human in all its facets and sought to engender empathy with destruction in all its forms as a way to further Adorno's challenge to the continual catastrophe of natural history.

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